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Seeing scenography: scopic regimes and the body of the spectator.

Given the designation of theatre as 'the seeing place' (Aronson 2005: 2) and the strongly visual nature of scenography we might wonder at how little consideration has been given so far to the act of looking, whether in scenographic studies or in theatre scholarship more generally. Yet concerns within wider cultural discourse about a dominance of the visual that 'has its end in rapt, mindless fascination' (Jameson 1990:1) have certainly influenced the way we conceptualise the visual dimension of theatre experience as 'a medium of optical illusion' (Rancière 2007: 272) and have marginalised scenography as mere decoration or as a distraction. But there are, to borrow from John Berger (1972), different ways of seeing scenography that reveal themselves in the act of looking. In this essay I challenge dominant interpretations of the act of seeing in theatre by arguing for the explanatory power of a dynamic, embodied conceptualisation of scenographic spectatorship centred on co-construction.

In the theatre, visual spectacle has been denigrated as idealised, as superficial or as excessive. Jen Harvie and Paul Allain identify common concern amongst 'many observers' that the visual is 'trivial' and distracts audiences 'from more important issues' (Allain and Harvie 2014: 194). 'The paradox of the spectator', as Jacques Rancière points out, is that 'there is no theatre without spectators' but being a spectator is 'a bad thing'; it implies looking, which is 'the opposite of knowing'. Theatrical spectacle, it is claimed, conceals its means of production and produces a passive spectator (Rancière 2007: 271-2). But Rancière has proposed that spectators are 'emancipated' from the disabling grip of spectacle by virtue of 'the power to translate in their own way what they are looking at' (278). His solution to the paradox is to emphasise the intellectual freedom of the spectators to make their own 'story' of the story in front of them; to translate images into words. But he is nonetheless wary of the visual itself and the recent blurring of boundaries between art and theatre and a proliferation of visual hybrids have led, he says, to stultification and 'hyperactive consumerism' (280).

Rancière's suspicion of visual excess is familiar within a broader critique of visual culture and it helps explain why scenography has rarely been considered as offering something more than seductive or dazzling effects to the experience of viewing theatre.

Part of the problem seems to be the dominance of one model of vision, that of the disembodied and passive viewer associated with the development of Renaissance perspective that continues to have some influence even now. In the late 1980s the Dia Art Foundation organised a symposium to explore of plural modes of vision and the different ways we see or are enabled to see. Of particular interest to scenography is Martin Jay's contribution that addresses 'scopic regimes'[i] of modernity as applied to the viewing of paintings. In it he reviews the hegemonic visual model of modernity that unites Renaissance perspective with Cartesian ideas of subjective rationality (Jay 1999: 4) and then identifies two alternatives to this model; the Baconian 'world of objects' and the 'baroque'. But how do the scopic regimes that Jay proposes apply to scenography? In particular, how might different models of seeing in the theatre dislodge the persistent notion of the disinterested, disembodied and passive spectator? And what does thinking about the relationship of the viewer to the visual tell us about the scenographic ways of seeing? Jay's models focus on the visual dimension of seeing, but I will also explore embodied vision and ask; what role does the body of the spectator assume within the realm of the scopic?

Theatre, scenography and the visual

Scenography is now established as integral component of theatrical performance and its reception. No longer considered simply as background, scenography has been shown to shape performance and to exert dramaturgical and poetic effects[ii]. Within this, the role of the spectator is also beginning to be considered. Authors including Benedetto (2010), McKinney (2013) and Trimingham (2013) have investigated how scenography contributes to audience experience in many contemporary forms of performance and how its multisensorial nature invites active and co-creative spectatorship. But there are gaps in relation to the wider and historical practice of scenography where we have tended to think about visual experience as synonymous with the aims and approaches of individual designers and accept that the intentions of scenographers and directors are sufficient to explain the experience of seeing. Rancière proposes emancipation from the spectacle through cognitive subjectivity rather than considering different ways of seeing spectacle itself. However, the expansion of scenographic practices, both on stage and beyond (Lotker

and Gough 2013) require us to engage with scenographic spectacle directly and theorise the act of looking at scenography.

In one of the very few books s that addresses visuality in the theatre, Maaike Bleeker identifies the importance of perspective in helping us understand how 'our senses are cultured to perceive certain privileged modes of representation as more natural, real, objective or convincing than others, and to relate these effects to the discourses which mediate in what we think we see' (Bleeker 2008: 13). For Bleeker, perspective is a way of seeing the world that is based on a kind of deception, a promise of authenticity or direct access to reality, that can never be fulfilled:

> The institution of perspective theatricalizes the field of vision. It creates a scenographic space in which all that is seen is staged for a viewer. Paradoxically, despite the high degree of scenic manipulation required to successfully integrate the rules of perspective into a painted or otherwise constructed scene, the promise of perspective is that of immediacy. (Bleeker 2008: 15).

Dominic Johnson adds to this by observing that in the dramatic theatre narrative has often presented a linguistic equivalent of visual perspective, one where spectatorship is an attempt 'to second-guess the supposedly singular, orthodox vision of the dramatist' (Johnson 2014: 28). Bleeker also considers how contemporary theatre positions the spectator, and includes some consideration of the 'spectator as body perceiving' (Bleeker 2008: 6) as part of her analysis of the subjectivity of vision. In this chapter I build on Bleeker's idea of 'the body seeing' (16) by focusing specifically on scenography and consider how the idea of a perceiving body modifies notions of the spectator rendered compliant and passive by the spectacle. But first I need to say more about the idea of scopic regimes and the regulatory structures of the visual.

Vision, visuality and scopic regimes

For the field of visual studies the Dia Art Foundation symposium marked an important contribution to the academic discourse on modern vision. In the preface to the published papers, Hal Foster points out that vision, or the physical operation of seeing,

might be distinguished from visuality, or the historical, discursive and social dimensions within which any act of vision is located. A 'scopic regime' accounts for the complex operation and intertwining of vision and visuality in a given time or place. Between these two aspects of the visual a whole host of differences in 'how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we might see this seeing or the unseeing therein' might reside (Foster 1988: ix). But it always the tendency of every scopic regime to 'close out these differences' and make it seem that there is just 'one essential vision'. In the same publication, Martin Jay says that whilst 'it is difficult to deny that the visual has been dominant in modern Western culture' (Jay 1988: 3), there is not one scopic regime or single model of vision that pertains throughout this period and that there are 'subcultures' of the visual that we have only come to appreciate from a postmodern vantage point (Jay 1988:4).

Johnson has suggested that thinking about scopic regimes helps us understand 'how historical developments have intruded upon visual experience in the theatre' (Johnson 2014: 23) and he uses the examples of Renaissance perspective in the fifteenth century and the introduction of gas and electricity in the nineteenth century. He quite rightly points out that these technological innovations go beyond enhancing visibility. They also change the process of seeing and understanding and scenographic light might come to have dramaturgical meaning that is equivalent to or may even exceed the text (Johnson 2014: 32). But there is more to consider regarding the way scenography positions the spectator within competing, and sometimes overlapping, scopic regimes and the extent to which the spectator is complicit with or resistant to spectacle.

Perspective and disembodied looking

The origins of western scenography are bound up with scenic verisimilitude and techniques of perspective have been instrumental in that development. Vitruvius, a Roman architect who recorded his studies of Greek theatre in *De Architectura* in 27 BCE describes scene painting practices that used the idea of lines radiating from a fixed point to make painted buildings seem to have three dimensions; 'what is figured upon vertical and plane surfaces can seem to recede in one part and project in another' (Vitruvius 1914). However, it

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is in the (re)invention[iii] of perspective in fifteenth century Italy, where the use of perspective in the theatre developed into elaborate painted scenery and perspectival scenic constructions that perspective emerges as a scopic regime. Renaissance perspective was not simply a technique of verisimilitude but a demonstration of the 'modern scientific world view' (Bleeker 2008: 12) after the 'religious underpinnings' (Jay 1988: 6) of the medieval world had been displaced. Alberti's theorisation of perspective in painting, *Di Pittura,*1435, offered a new approach to the representation of space that drew on geometrical and scientific understanding:

> The basic device was the idea of symmetrical visual pyramids or cones with one of their apexes the receding vanishing or centric point in the painting, the other the eye of the painter or the beholder. The transparent window that was the canvas, in Alberti's famous metaphor, could be understood as a flat mirror reflecting the geometricalized space radiating out from the viewing eye (Jay 1988: 6-7).

Importantly, this rationalised and objectified view of space reflects the view from a single eye, fixed and unblinking, and does not replicate our physiological, binocular vison that moves in jumps between focal points[iv]. This abstracted and disembodied viewpoint has been widely associated with Rene Descartes's ideas about the dominance of the mind in determining the nature of things and this 'Cartesian' perspective has been taken by many to be the determining concept of vision in the modern era (Jay 1988: 3 – 5). Cartesian perspectivalism has seemed to offer an objective and truthful view of the world. Even though there is a 'fundamental discrepancy' (Panofsky 1991 [1927]: 31) between our actual experience of seeing and the way that vision is constructed in Cartesian perspectivalism, this model has 'pervaded our conception of the visible world' and explains how 'our senses are cultured to perceive certain privileged modes of representation as more natural, real, objective, or convincing than others' (Bleeker 2008: 13).

It has been pointed out by several theatre scholars that a particular problem with the realisation of a perspective effect in the theatre is the physical placement of viewer in theatre. Richard Southern notes that there is only one place where the view completes the effect of perspective scenery as a 'real' structure and not just a painting (Southern 1962: 231). Marvin Carlson says this place was located as the position from which the 'sponsoring

prince' was seated (Carlson 1993: 137). From his elevated central position[v] the prince was provided with a clear view of the stage and his subjects at the same time as he himself became the 'visual anchor for the stage perspective'. The less privileged spectators, meanwhile, had 'imaginatively to correct their distorted view of that city by calculating their spatial (and thus social) distance from the duke's perfect view' (Carlson 1993: 140). Perspective scenery (and the theatres that were built to house it) can be seen to act as endorsement of the dominant social order. Idealised and elegantly abstracted, the spectator in this model of vision is disciplined to perceive the artifice as rational, objective and natural.

In other ways, too, perspective scenery fits well with readings of Cartesian perspectivalism, especially those that see it as complicit with commodification of art and enabling capitalist exchange (Jay 1988: 9). Renaissance practice signals a commodification of the scenographic and its capacity to demonstrate wealth and power through the costly material and labour it required. The many publications that circulated across Europe showing theatre designs by artists such as Sebastiano Serlio and Nicola Sabbattini meant that the practice of perspective scenery could be replicated and adopted by those who possessed the considerable capital resource that it required (see Christopher Baugh, forthcoming).

Perspectivalism in the theatre is associated not just with the way scenery is conceived but with the whole apparatus of the auditorium. Richard Wagner's Festspielhaus at Bayreuth is a renowned example that sought to structure and control the audience's vision so that their full attention was given to the work on stage. The fan shape of the steeply-raked, single-sweep auditorium with no balconies or boxes combined with a double proscenium was aimed at achieving an unimpeded view of a scene that separates the stage. The darkness of the auditorium and the orchestra hidden from view, by means of a curved canopy over the pit, further enhanced the effect of the brightly lit stage as the sole focus of the audience's attention. The arrangement and positioning of the viewer was calculated in such a way that 'the spectator would be exclusively preoccupied with the spectacle' (Crary 2001: 252). Wagner aimed to create the illusion of a stage that was distant whilst the people appearing on it 'are of superhuman stature' (Crary 2001: 251 f.n. 249). The spectators in this

arrangement are absorbed and dominated by the stage scene and by the single vision of the director to which the scenography is subordinated.

Looking in Wagner's theatre seems to be the epitome of a perspectival model where the spectator is disciplined to defer to the transcendental image. This reinforces the idea of scenography operating within a scopic regime based on disembodied deception. Yet even in the Renaissance period there is evidence that looking at scenography has the potential to play on the relationship between an idealised depiction and quotidian experience. Fabio Finotti who has studied eye-witness accounts from the Italian Renaissance says the appeal of perspective scenery lay in the way it connected the daily lives of spectators with the idealised and fictionalised scene. The combination of architectonic and painted scenery meant the loss of an imaginary boundary between the theatrical space and reality. As a consequence, 'the scene becomes the center for interplay between reality and fiction that fuses the space occupied by the spectators with that of the actors' (Finotti 2010: 27).

Bernadino Prosperi, a contemporary witness of a 1508 performance of *Cassaria* at Ferrara says 'the best part' of the performance were the scenes (by Pellegrino da Udine) which

> …consisted of a street and perspectival view of land with houses, churches, bell towers, and gardens, rendered with such diversity as to leave the viewer unsatiated; all this contrived with such ingenuity and skill that I doubt it will be discarded, but rather preserved for later use. (cited in Finotti 2010: 30)

Another eye witness is Baldassar Castiglione who saw a performance of Bibbiena's *Calandria* in Urbino in 1513. He writes:

> Moreover, the scene gave the illusion of a beautiful city with streets, palaces, churches, towers, and real streets, each of which appeared in relief, being enhanced further by fine painting and well-rendered perspective…Certain areas were adorned with illusive glass of precious stones that looked absolutely genuine, freestanding illusive marble figures. (cited in Finotti 2010: 37)

Prosperi says he is left 'unsatiated', which suggests that he has been 'captured by images' in the negative sense that spectacle is said to produce (Rancière 2007: 272). Castiglione's

account, though, makes it clear that he is knowingly complicit in the scenic illusion. These accounts seem to be evidence of a complex interaction between vision and visuality that complicate the regime of Cartesian perspectivalism; rather than a single and totalising image working on a passive and disembodied spectator, the scene here is registered as '...a fluid network of interrelationships between relief and profundity, architectonic mass and pictorial vertigo, order and motion, centrality and centrifugal explosion, reality and scenic fiction' (Finotti 2010: 32 – 33). In this reading, the visual experience appears to anticipate other models of vision, particularly, as we shall see, what Jay calls the 'baroque'. So whilst the craft and skill of scenographers might have been harnessed to reinforce the illusion of a 'natural' order, we need to be cautious about the extent to which Cartesian perspectivalism was predominant in the theatre either in the Renaissance period or since.

A world of objects

As one possible alternative, Jay draws from Svetlana Alpers' book, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*. In contrast to the religious and classical themes seen in Italian art, Dutch painting featured landscapes, domestic interior scenes and still lives. In doing so, it drew attention to a proliferation of objects, their textures and surfaces and the way that light was reflected by them (see Alpers 1983: 44). Furthermore, the worlds that are depicted in Dutch painting are 'not contained entirely within the frame' (Jay 1988: 12). In Italian perspective painting the frame positions the viewer in the place that the painter stood, but in Dutch seventeenth-century paintings there is 'no clearly situated viewer' (Alpers 1983:44) and their frames are 'arbitrary and without the totalizing function they serve in Southern art':

> Rejecting the privileged, constitutive role of the monocular subject, it emphasizes instead the prior existence of a world of objects depicted on the flat canvas, a world indifferent to the beholder's position in front of it. (Jay 1988: 12)

The model of looking in Dutch painting is underpinned by empiricism rather than the rationalism of Cartesian perspectivalism[vi] and correlates, Jay says, with the philosophy of Francis Bacon rather than that of Descartes. Dutch painting lingers, and encourages the

viewer to linger, on the 'fragmentary, detailed, and richly articulated surface' of its content in a way that suggests that a combination of sense experience and visual interrogation are key to understanding the depicted world (1988: 13).

In the theatre, too, there are indications that a scopic regime based on the deployment of objects and on attention to the surface and texture of things were in operation, although not necessarily concurrent with that of Dutch painting[vii]. The system of organising and changing perspective scenery established in Renaissance Italy (see Mohler 2008) and which was subsequently adopted and perpetuated across court theatres in Europe was generally speaking an ordered, symmetrical arrangement of wings leading the viewer's eye to a backdrop in a manner that echoes the principles of Cartesian perspectivalism. There were some notable refinements of this basic approach, though, that offer further evidence of competing models of vision and an increasing interest in 'the world of objects' in scenography. Philippe de Loutherbourg's scenes in late eighteenth century London required asymmetric, heavily profiled wings to accommodate depictions of actual places and the detail of objects that might be found in them. A description of his design for *Omai; or, A Trip Around the World* (Covent Garden, London, 1785) runs as follows:

> The scenery is infinitely beyond any designs or paintings the stage has ever displayed. To the rational mind, what can be more entertaining than to contemplate prospects or countries in their natural colourings and tints. – To bring into living action, the customs and manners of different nations! To see exact representations of their buildings, marine vessels, arms, manufactures, sacrifices and dresses?
>
> (cited in Baugh 1990: 47)

Loutherbourg, a renowned landscape artist as well as a scenographer, was known to have recorded the natural sites from first hand observation and translated this into his stage productions using both painted and actual light to accentuate the effect of the surface detail of the painting. Productions such as *The Wonders of Derbyshire* (1779) at Drury Lane, London, mark, in England at least, a shift away from idealised scenes towards a capturing of the material qualities of the real world. However, it is only at the very end of the nineteenth century that a 'world of objects' becomes a significant model of vision in the theatre.

In his preface to *Miss Julie* (1888), August Strindberg registers his dissatisfaction with the gap between representation and actuality exemplified by stage doors that 'are made of canvas and sway at the slightest touch'. He is calling for a new approach to design that is drawn from empirical experience:

> ...nothing is more difficult than making a room on stage resemble a real room, no matter how easy the scene painter finds it to create erupting volcanoes and waterfalls. Even if the walls have to be of canvas, it is surely time to stop painting shelves and kitchen utensils on them. There are so many other stage conventions in which we are asked to believe that we might be spared the effort of believing in painted saucepans. (Strindberg 1888)

Alongside a desire that scenography should pay more attention to the characteristics and behaviours of the material world, Strindberg, like the Dutch painters before him, also recognises, the effect of using 'asymmetry and cropped framing' in order to leave the viewer 'free to conjecture'. Strindberg, though, credits Impressionist painting, not Dutch seventeenth century art, as his inspiration. What is significant here is the way the spectator is given room to reflect on what is left out of the scene as well as what is included. Strindberg doesn't advocate the reconstruction of real rooms, simply sufficient attention to actual experience of the material world so as engage and activate the imagination of the audience.

Konstantin Stanislavsky's use of authentic objects[viii] in his productions might also be considered as part of an empirical approach to seeing. For the 1901 production of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* at the Moscow Art Theatre, the designer Viktor Simov located commonplace objects to reflect 'the ponderous pettiness of provincial life' (Senelick 1999: 60). These objects included:

> a damask tablecloth, provincial wallpaper, yellowed painted floors, a threadbare Turkoman carpet, a cuckoo clock that was slow to strike and then counted out the time hurriedly, as if embarrassed. (Senelick 1999: 61)

The scenography evoked the daily life of the middle classes through particular details of the colour and texture and the wear and tear of real objects. It was intended to appeal directly

to audiences who, through the medium of the objects, would be able recognise their own lives in the one that was being depicted on the stage. The bedroom in Act 3 was 'cluttered with furniture, and [had] little apparent architectural harmony' (Gottlieb 1984: 25). The wealth of surface details and the apparent lack of pictorial organisation is reminiscent of Jay's Baconian model of vision. The effect is not simply to illustrate the type of house that the Prozorov family are living in, but to draw attention to the way that objects are conceived as part of fabric of their lives. Laurence Senelick says that the Art Theatre's aim was 'quotidian materiality' rather than 'self-sufficent displays of painterly technique' (Senelick 1999: 80) but this overlooks the potential of objects to evoke feeling as well as simply describe. These particular objects were considered by Simov to be capable of evoking a particular milieu where 'colours fade, thoughts become debased, energy gets smothered in a dressing-gown, ardour is stifled by a housecoat, talent dries up like a plant without water' (Simov quoted in Gottlieb 1984: 24). The affective potential of real objects and materials marks a significant point in the development of western scenography and the fascination with the agentic capacity of apparently inanimate things has been a persistent feature of practice since then.

Nonetheless, the appeal of a 'world of objects' can seem superficial. The delight in objects and the 'valorization of material surfaces' in Dutch painting is a representation of the 'fetishism of commodities' that serves a market economy (Jay 1988: 15). The enthusiasm for Loutherbourg's scenographies, for example, coincides with a period of increasing leisure travel and cultural consumption for an expanding bourgeoisie. The appeal of the accurate realisation of designs that make reference to actual places, existing architectures and the objects and materials that belong with them is still evident in contemporary practice. Bunny Christie's designs for *The White Guard* (2010) and *The Cherry Orchard* (2011) for the National Theatre, UK, both took inspiration from paintings of evocative interiors and from existing buildings and were realised using subtlety and variation in colour, texture and translucency to produce and ultra-realistic effect of surface texture. However, the discussion of these designs on the National Theatre website focuses on the skills of recreation, fetishizing the surface detail and the lifelike replication of it rather than exploring their affective potential.

But scenic naturalism has been influential, in Western theatre at least, in establishing a more profound connection between the look and the action of the environment. Raymond Williams explains that:

> In high naturalism the lives of the characters have soaked into their environment… Moreover, the environment has soaked into the lives. The relations between men and things are at a deep level interactive, because what is there physically, as a space or means for living, is a whole shaped and shaping social history. (Williams 1973: 140)

As far as scenography is concerned, high naturalism goes beyond simply noting the inventory of objects on stage and comparing them with real rooms, real places and begins to implicate the spectators' embodied experience of the material world. In order to appreciate the reciprocal way in which fictional lives and their environments are intertwined, the spectator is asked to call on their own spatial and tactile memories of the experience of objects and of how particular materials and surfaces feel to the touch. Seeing the movement of materials, for example in a costume, can trigger embodied understanding of the weight of fabric or the effect on the wearer's posture; noting the marks of wear on a piece of furniture can evoke a spectator's tactile memory. In this way an intellectual appreciation of the characters in their environment is supplemented, enriched and possibly even supplanted by visual observation and embodied understanding. So, whilst a 'world of objects' approach to scenographic seeing is sometimes too bound up with the appearance of authentic artefacts, it also contains the possibility of a more profound and embodied connection between theatre and the material world.

Palpable visions

Jay's third model of vision is the 'baroque'. This he associates with the architecture and painting of the Catholic Counter Reformation of the seventeenth century. 'In opposition to the lucid, linear, fixed, planimetric, closed form of the Renaissance…the baroque was painterly, recessional, soft-focused, multiple and open '(1988: 16). Jay refers to Christine Buci-Glucksmann's analysis of the baroque as a 'dazzling, disorientating, ecstatic surplus of

images' that rejects both the idealised space of the Cartesian tradition and the 'faith in the material solidity of the world' demonstrated in the Baconian model. The baroque model of vision has no single guiding philosophy and, moreover, seems to eschew the idea of 'intellectual clarity' in favour of 'an irreducibly imagistic' approach (16- 17).

This fits well with the idea of scenography as collage of images and effects aimed at blending reality and fantasy. Baroque tendencies in scenography might be traced back to the end of the Renaissance period and to scenographers such as Inigo Jones who combined perspective scenery together with a variety of complex stage machinery and opulent costume. Although Jones was influenced and inspired by Renaissance design of the kind practiced by Serlio, he departed from a strict adherence to Serlian principles, 'flouting the scientific orderliness of the method in order to achieve something more humane and expressive' (Orrell 1988: 239). But, at the same time, the management of the visual experience in Jones' design for court masques, as in other such masques and ceremonies, was shaped quite specifically in the service of the wealthy patrons. The extravagance of costumes, ingenious changes of scene and astounding effects were a celebration and affirmation of the wealth and power of the court (Sawday 2007: 185). Court masques such as these harness the dazzling display of the baroque as a metaphor for the magnificence and ultimate authority of the court.

Later, in the English theatre of the mid nineteenth century, when the patrons were the theatre going public rather than the nobility, Victorian spectacle offers perhaps a more compelling example of the 'ecstatic' baroque. This vivid description of a pantomime transformation scene serves as an example of the dazzling imagery that scenography can produce:

> First the "gauzes" lift slowly one behind the other – perhaps the most pleasing of all scenic effects – giving glimpses of "the Realms of Bliss," seen beyond in a tantalising fashion. Then is revealed a kind of half-glorified country, clouds and banks, evidently concealing much. Always a sort of pathetic and at the same time exultant strain rises, and it repeated as the changes go on…Now some more of the banks begin to part slowly showing realms of light, with a few divine beings – fairies – rising slowly

here and there…Thus it goes on, the lights streaming on full, in every colour and

from every quarter, in the richest effulgence. (Fitzgerald 1881: 89)

As with the eye-witness accounts from the fifteenth century, there is a complicity in the illusion; the writer combines his understanding of the technologies being deployed with a desire to be transported by the effects. The orientation towards metaphysical and erotic desire fits well with the baroque model where 'the body returns to dethrone the disinterested gaze of the disincarnated Cartesian spectator' (Jay 1988: 18).

This 'theatre of pure diversion' (Gilder cited in Bratton 2003: 9) is exactly the kind of theatre experience that was seen to undermine theatre's more cerebral aims and to attract a new kind of spectator, 'gluttonous…clamourous, ill-bred, uncouth' (Filon cited in Bratton 2003: 13). Alongside the cultural and class-based prejudice displayed here, the implication is that spectacular scenography crowds out the more edifying experience of attending to dramatic literature. This sentiment is reinforced by William Bodham Donne, journalist and theatre censor ('Examiner of Plays' 1857 -1874) who mocked the popular Victorian taste for 'palpable' visions:

To touch our emotions we need not the imaginatively true but the physically real: the visions which our ancestors saw with the mind's eye, must be embodied for us in palpable forms…All must be made palpable to sight, no less than to feeling: and this lack of imagination affects equally both those who enact and those who construct the scene. (cited in Booth 2005: 7)

Donne suggests that spectacular scenography inhibits the spectators' imaginative engagement with the drama and implies that the arousal of emotion and feeling through the visual elements is a distraction from theatre's proper purpose. Donne's views belong to a longstanding line of criticism of the visual in Western theatre where the text is privileged over the visual (Kennedy 1993:5). The popular taste for spectacular scenography has also been seen as evidence of its lack of artistic worth (Bratton 2003: 14 -15) and the sensuous appeal that the baroque makes to the whole body further compounds this idea of popular spectacle as vulgar or decadent and quite distinct from the values claimed by the dramatic theatre.

However, contemporary postmodernist and postdramatic theatre exhibits a much more favourable view of the scenographic baroque. Hans-Thies Lehmann, in recognising the importance of Robert Wilson's work, says it is part of a tradition of that includes 'baroque theatre effects', 'Jacobean masques' and 'Victorian spectacle' where 'the phenomenon has priority over the narrative, the effect of the image precedence over the individual actor, and contemplation over interpretation.' In Wilson's theatre it is not just static images that are the focus for spectators, but the metamorphosis of images, often accentuated by the slow speed at which they occur. This creates a space of visual 'transitions, ambiguities and correspondences' (Lehmann 2006: 80). Wilson's work, like Jay's designation of the baroque is 'irreducibly imagistic'. It requires the spectator to experience what is actually happening on the stage and frustrates attempts to offer clear readings or narrative unties. Wilson's scenography, along with the scenographies created by artists such as Richard Foreman, Heiner Goebbels and Societas Raffaello Sanzio (and many others besides) employ an abundance of visual images that expect spectators to 'postpone' meaning whilst they attend to a conglomeration of 'sensory impressions' (Lehmann 2008: 87). Lehmann gestures towards a phenomenological basis of postdramatic theatrical perception, but he does not pursue this; his focus, instead, is on the forms and compositional structures of postdramatic work where spatial, temporal and material structures displace dramatic texts. However, he does make it clear that the sensory impressions of postdramatic 'visual dramaturgy' has turned the stage into 'the arena of reflection on the spectators' act of seeing'. Rather than 'abandoning oneself to the flow of narration', spectators are invited to involve themselves in a dynamic and 'constructive co-producing of the total audio-visual complex of the theatre' (Lehmann 2008: 157).

This co-construction is an active engagement with the visual and is at odds with Jay's claims that the baroque 'generates only allegories of obscurity and opacity' (Jay 1988: 18). Whilst an active reflection on the process of viewing in postdramatic performance does not necessarily lead to clear-cut messages, the material phenomena of the stage are, nonetheless, the means by which spectators are able to access potential meanings or 'concrete, sensuously intensified *perceptibility*' (Lehmann 2008: 99). The spectator's body is significant as part of the way in which the visual might be understood; not simply as a representation of the world, but as a material and spatial environment within which

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awareness and understanding can be triggered. In order to pursue the idea of the spectator's body as part of the process of visual perception I want to propose a further model; one of embodied spectatorship.

Embodied spectatorship

Each of Jay's three models figures the body of the spectator differently; in Cartesian perspectivalism the spectator's actual body is dismissed and replaced with a disembodied monocular view; in the Baconian, 'world of objects' model the sensory, tactile experience of the viewing body is summoned up through the detailed observation of visual surfaces; in the baroque model the body of spectator is stimulated or disorientated by an abundance of visual material. With each model the engagement of body and 'the carnal density of the observer' (Crary 1988: 43) becomes more apparent. But none of them encompass the idea of a fully 'embodied' spectator, that is, a spectator that is positioned as Maurice Merleau-Ponty says, within 'the weight, the thickness, the flesh of each color, of each sound, of each tactile texture' (Merleau Ponty 1968: 114). Furthemore, Jay's three models are predicated on the idea that the act of spectatorship is determined by the artwork and the historical, discursive and social conditions within which it was produced and this tends to assume a passive spectator. Even though there are appeals to the spectator's body that begin to admit the possibility of a more reflective and interactive response to an artwork, Jay's models do not account for the kind of co-constructive experience of contemporary theatre that Lehmann describes.

In film studies, however, Vivian Sobchack has articulated an embodied and phenomenological approach to spectatorship that extends Merleau-Ponty's idea that the body is a material object among all the other objects in the world (Merleau-Ponty 2001: 236). Sobchack proposes that what filmmaker, viewer and the film itself have in common is an 'embodied existence [that] inflects and reflects the world as always already significant' (Sobchack 1992: 12). This position recognises the physiological nature of encarnated vision and the interconnection of visual and other senses[ix] and it reinforces the idea of vision as an active interplay of a seeing body and material world within which it is placed (Sobchack

1992: 25). Merleau-Ponty proposes that a 'strange system' of exchanges occurs through the correspondences between things looking and the thing being looked at. In the case of paintings, for example, 'Quality, light, colour, depth, which are there before us, are there only because they awaken an echo in our bodies and because the body welcomes them' (Merleau-Ponty 1993: 125).

This is different from the scopic regimes reviewed so far, where the artwork and the materialist conditions of its production are taken to shape the act of viewing. Here the act of seeing is co-constructive with the thing being seen; the embodied spectator is positioned in a dialogic exchange with the artwork. Like Rancière's emancipated spectator, the embodied spectator is engaged in a process of making sense of the performance 'through an unpredictable and irreducible play of associations and disassociations' (Rancière 279). But the process of 'making sense' through embodied understanding needs to be understood in a very different way than Rancière suggests. Rancière's spectators are translators who appropriate the material they can associate with and turn it into their own story; images are understood by being turned into words (280) whereas an embodied model of spectatorship engages with the materials themselves. It proceeds from Merleau-Ponty's philosophy that our contact with the world is 'pre-reflective' and is 'a function of all our sensory, motor, and affective capacities' as well as our intellectual capacity (Crowther 1993: 102-103) and this accounts for the 'sensuously intensified perceptibility' that Lehmann describes (2008: 99). Like film spectatorship, scenographic spectatorship that takes account of the sensory and material dimension offers a model of embodied seeing and an actively engaged spectator. A phenomenological and embodied account of seeing explains how the palpability of vision is the basis of aesthetic experience.

It also opens up the possibility that scenographic materials might have agentic capacity in themselves. In the historical examples of scenography I have referred to so far, the assumption might be that the scenography is activated, given purpose, by human agents, principally the performers; stage objects are mere 'props' for actors, stage environments are illustrative fictional spaces for characters who are agents. But as I hope is clear by now, scenographic materials always have the capacity to act on us directly and

bodily as well as signify social and cultural meaning. Embodied spectatorship brings this capacity to the fore and allows that, within an emergent, co-creative process of perception, scenography itself has agency.

Erika Fischer-Lichte says that contemporary performance does not try to control and discipline audiences in the way that it once seemed to do. Instead it pursues an aesthetic of 'autopoiesis' (2008: 39) that operates through the 'feedback loop' (38) between the performer and spectator. This is particularly apparent where traditional relationships between performers and audience are set aside and roles become blurred, for example in found spaces or 'socially-integrated locations' (53). In these instances it is apparent that the space itself is an active part of the 'self-generating and ever-changing autopoietic feedback loop' (50). But autopoiesis is activated not only inter-subjectively, but between human spectators and the performance environment. Between the space of performance, the performers and the spectator the 'atmosphere' of the performance is formed (116). According to Gernot Böhme, atmospheres establish the basis of aesthetic and perceptual experience and they come about due to the 'ecstasy of things'. The properties of things (form, extension, volume colour, smell, sound) don't just simply define the parameters of things as objects but radiate outwards. A property such as the form of a thing can exert 'an external effect. It radiates as it were into the environment, takes away the homogeneity of the surrounding space and fills it with tensions and suggestions of movement' (Böhme 1993: 121). On a bodily level, the ecstasy of things provokes sensual impressions that are 'ultimately incommensurable with linguistic expression and only very inadequately describable' yet they form the basis of understanding where the perceived object triggers associations and becomes 'interlinked with ideas, memories, sensations and emotions' (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 142).

Since the publication of 'Scopic Regimes of Modernity', Martin Jay has lamented what he sees as the displacement of spectatorial distance with the titillating and vertiginous pleasure of sensorial overload. In contemporary culture (films, performance art, fairground rides and exhibitions) he sees a 'kinaesthetic regime based on rapturous stimulation and participatory immediacy' (2003: 110) which robs us of a capacity for judgement. Where Fischer-Lichte sees sensual impressions leading to some form of understanding, Jay sees

only superficial stimulation. However, Renee van de Vall questions Jay's supposition of critical judgement resting on the achievement of distance between spectator and spectacle. A 'phenomenological aesthetics' of contemporary spectatorship doesn't place experiential involvement in opposition to critical reflection, instead, she says, reflection emerges from within experience (2008: 109). The 'experiential openness' that can be staged by works of art might initiate moments of 'reflexive awareness' that might counteract the anaesthetising tendencies of spectacle that Jay and many others fear (131). Vall proposes a 'reflexivity in the sphere of the senses' that is continuous with reflexivity in thinking (119), and this serves to extend Fischer-Lichte's notion of autopoiesis. An in addition to this, an openness to the spectator's experience of scenography should also include an acknowledgement of the agentic capacity of non-human materials.

In a model of embodied vision in the theatre, material elements such as light, volumetric space, smell and sound take on a particular significance. The postdramatic work that Lehmann discusses and in contemporary site-specific and immersive theatre (Punchdrunk, Pearson/Brookes, La Fura dels Baus, Teatro da Vertigem) have served to highlight this mode of spectatorship, but it might equally be applied to work such as that made by those pioneers of contemporary scenography such as Adolphe Appia and his idea of rhythmic space, Edward Gordon Craig and architectonic space or Josef Svoboda's psycho-plastic space. This embodied model underlines the active role that materials can play; the spectator is an active part of the emergence of meaning but so too are the scenographic materials themselves. In that sense, embodied spectatorship not only acknowledges the co-creative capacity that contemporary performance often invites; it also flattens the ontological distinction between subjects and objects so that the act of seeing scenography can be understood as a discursive practice that is rooted in what Karen Barad calls a 'posthuman performative' approach (Barad 135). Following Barad's account, the body of the spectator is not 'the fixed dividing line' (136) between itself and other things, human and non-human, and the emerging perceptibility (or autopoiesis) of performance comes about through the iterative 'intra-actions' of 'matter-in-the-process-of-becoming' (179). Embodied spectatorship recognises that the event of experiencing scenography is a dynamic and iterative process of intra-action between the materiality of human and non-human where 'knowing and being...are mutually implicated' (185).

Conclusion

Applying Jay's regimes to scenography reveals some tension between models of vision and individual experience, between visuality and vision and also some differences between art and theatre. In the theatre, as Gay McAuley says, 'the scopic drive is always being subverted and displaced' (McAuley 239). But models of vision assist in thinking through the relationship between the scenography and the spectator and the basis of spectacle as a 'bad thing' (Rancière 2007) is revealed in different ways; Cartesian perspectivalism configures the spectator as disembodied and docile, disciplined to accept an idealised image; a 'world of things' dwells in commodities and surfaces; and the baroque offers a dazzling and distracting display of excess. But at the same time there are indications that within these broad models other possibilities might be at work, and that rather than vision and action always being in opposition, they might be brought closer together or even merge in a model of embodied spectatorship.

There are some overlaps between embodied spectatorship and other models. The Baconian or 'world of objects' that I have associated with scenographic naturalism also draws on embodied experience. And the baroque provokes and stimulates embodied looking that might be active and co-constructive and not simply distracting or disorientating. In offering embodied spectatorship as a model of vision for scenography, I am not suggesting we should abandon the others (as Jay and Foster point out, there is merit in considering a plurality of models), but I do want to argue for the need to overhaul and revise entrenched ideas about the passive nature of looking in the theatre, and in particular, the act of looking at scenography. And by insisting on the bodily basis of seeing in the theatre we can appreciate the full extent of how scenography activates perception and emergent understanding.

Looking in the theatre is not a purely visual experience. To look at scenography is to apprehend not only illustrations or depictions, but to notice the composition and orchestration of materials and feel the way they work on us at a bodily level. This is a way of knowing and a kind of action because it connects us to our own experience of the world, our

memories and imaginations and our experiential understanding of daily life. The effects of theatrical spectacle need not overwhelm us or disable our capacity for reflexive looking. Rather, acknowledging the bodily dimension of looking in the theatre might stir us to an awareness of the processes of spectatorship and point towards the dynamic, co-constructive and intra-active potential of seeing scenography.

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[i] 'Scopic regime' is a term coined by Christian Metz. See Metz, Christian. 1982. *Psychoanlysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier*, trans. Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster and Alfred Guzzetti. London: Macmillan.

[ii] I am thinking here of recent volumes that include Aronson 2005, Baugh 2013, Hannah and Harslof, 2008 listed above and also Collins, Jane and Nisbet, Andrew 2010, *Theatre and Performance Design: A Reader in Scenography*. London: Routledge and Palmer, Scott. 2013. *Ligh*t. Basingstoke: Palgrave

[iii] There is some debate about the precise nature contribution of Vitruvius' ideas to the Renaissance adoption of perspective on the Italian stage and this sits within a broader literature and debate on the history and 'discovery, rediscovery or invention' of Renaissance perspective (Jay 1988: 5).

[iv] Jonathan Crary says that by the 1850s scientists had established that vision is not the result of 'an instantaneous intake of an image' but 'a complex aggregate of processes of eye movements that provisionally built up the appearance of a stable image' (2001: 290).

[v] Orrell points out that this commonplace observation might be challenged by evidence from Sebastiano Serlio's designs (Orrell 1988: 218)

[vi] The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy explains: 'The dispute between rationalism and empiricism concerns the extent to which we are dependent upon sense experience in our effort to gain knowledge. Rationalists claim that there are significant ways in which our concepts and knowledge are gained independently of sense experience. Empiricists claim that sense experience is the ultimate source of all our concepts and knowledge': http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rationalism-empiricism/ accessed 6 April 2016

[vii] Although Martin Jay's scopic regimes are each associated with a particular period in painting, he sees them as models that operate throughout the period of modernism and beyond.

[viii] Stanislavski's approach was criticised by Meyerhold for being obsessively over-elaborate (see McKinney and Butterworth, 2009: 38) and by Chekhov for trivialising the text (see McKinney and Butterworth, 2009: 91).

[ix] Jonathan Crary (1990) has written extensively about the discoveries of 'subjective vision' and the implications for art in the nineteenth century, when scientists discovered the operation of vision was not separate and objective like a camera but located in the body and influenced by the other senses. See *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge: MIT Press.